



PATRICIA STOCKDILL

An excise tax on fishing gear is in part responsible for providing anglers the ability to access the water. In this case, it's via a fishing pier.

Fisheries Funding Backbone

By Patricia Stockdill

When good things happen, more good things often follow.

For anglers, the first good thing to happen could well be something – the 1937 Pittman-Robertson Act – that benefited wildlife, not fish. The legislation, formally called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, funds many of today's wildlife management, research and habitat programs through an excise tax paid on hunting equipment.

Armed with the P-R success model, Congress passed in 1950 the Dingell-Johnson Act, the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration program. Like its wildlife counterpart, it places an excise tax of up to 11 percent on fishing-related gear. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service distributes the proceeds, based on a formula, to every state.

"It's the backbone of our funding," said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries division chief. Sport Fish Restoration funds, not fishing license sales, account for most of the Department's fisheries budget.

Even so, North Dakota fishing license sales are critical to fisheries funding. License money contributes a 25 percent nonfederal match the Department is required to provide for each Sport Fish Restoration-funded fisheries management and production project. License sales also factor in to the formula that determines how much each state receives. Last year, 162,000 fishing licenses were sold in the state.



The fishing likely wouldn't be as good as it is today in North Dakota if it weren't for Sport Fish Restoration funding.

North Dakota was allocated \$3.23 million in Sport Fish Restoration funds in 2006. Altogether, the program paid out \$290 million nationwide.

Many anglers, such as Garrison's Brad Rohde, identify Sport Fish Restoration funds with providing access, especially when it comes to chasing water levels and boat ramps up and down the Missouri River System. Dakota Tackle owner Wade Anderson, Bismarck, agrees. Many anglers, if they are aware an excise tax is on their fishing gear, identify it with enhancing the Department's ability to provide access, he said.

Program Funding

Sport Fish Restoration funds, however, provide more than access. The Department uses the funds to pay anywhere from 10-75 percent of these programs:

- Fish management – Funding for field biologists and a variety of management programs, including paddlefish tagging; Lake Sakakawea smelt population monitoring; population sampling on small and mid-sized lakes, Devils Lake, and the Missouri River System; Red River dam modifications; creel surveys; and other special projects. A portion of the entire Department's fish management

Money garnered from the sale of fishing-related gear helps to improve boat access to North Dakota waters.



work is funded with Sport Fish Restoration money.

- Fish production – Stocking is important to fishing success in some state lakes. Sport Fish Restoration funds pay for spawning operations and distribution of fingerlings to North Dakota lakes. In addition, 75 percent of a \$200,000 grant to Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery is funded through the Sport Fish Restoration program.

- Fisheries development – Boat ramps, access roads and amenities such as vault toilets and fish cleaning stations, are another component of Sport Fish Restoration funding.

- Boating safety and aquatic education – Safe boating courses and aquatic education programs, including Pathways to Fishing, received a boost when the 1984 Wallop-Breaux Amendment authorized use of Sport Fish Restoration funds for those programs.

Anglers ultimately are the ones paying the excise tax as manufacturers pass on expenses. Still, it benefits anglers.

Others benefit, as well, Power said. “We’re all in this together,” he said. He compares the benefits to a triangle involving industry (recreation wholesalers, retailers and manufacturers), government (state agencies that manage fisheries resources) and anglers. Everyone benefits, Power said, because improved fisheries and fish habitat means potentially better fishing success and opportunities for anglers, which means more anglers and therefore more sales of

Randy Hiltner, northeast district fisheries supervisor, Devils Lake, is one of several Department fisheries biologists who head projects funded in part by the Sport Fish Restoration program. The walleye in the inset photo was tagged for study purposes.



CRAIG BIEHRLE



CRAIG BIEHRLE

Hatchery Help

“Since the completion of the Garrison Dam it has become increasingly evident that additional fish hatching facilities must be made available. The proposed hatchery which would be situated below the Dam would go a long way in aiding the fisheries program” – North Dakota OUTDOORS, July 1957.

The author may never know how prophetic he would become. Without the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, and its ability to raise fingerlings and fry for fish stocking, many North Dakota waters would support only a shadow of their present fisheries, including Lake Sakakawea. Yet without the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration funds, the hatchery as it is today would also be a shadow of its present self.

The Department has provided annual grants through Sport Fish Restoration funds to the hatchery since 1988, when it first contributed \$58,300. The amount has steadily increased, reaching \$175,000 in 1995, to \$209,000 in 2006. The grant pays for some USFWS employee salaries, electricity and other operational expenses, said Rob Holm, hatchery manager.

In addition, the Department also provides in-kind services, including equipment and personnel, for spawning and stocking operations throughout the state. The hatchery’s role is raising fish; Department personnel deliver eggs to the hatchery and stock fish in state waters. Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration reimburses 75 percent of expenses associated with Department spawning and stocking programs, which is approximately another \$100,000 when administrative costs are factored in.

“It’s a great partnership. Everyone is getting a good deal out of it,” Holm said. The Department also paid for construction of 40 rearing ponds and a trout and salmon cold-water species building in 1988-89. “That’s about \$2.5 million worth of investment there,” Holm said. And that was just the cost of the ponds – the trout and salmon building was another \$1.5 million.



PATRICIA STOCKDILL



PATRICIA STOCKDILL

The Department paid \$6,700 for a water line from Spillway Pond – a man-made lake below Garrison Dam – to the hatchery in 2005, needed because of water supply concerns resulting from Lake Sakakawea's low elevation. Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration funded 75 percent of that expense.

Without the Department's contribution, Holm estimates the hatchery would lose at least three biologists. In addition, its northern pike, walleye, trout and salmon production capabilities would likely be reduced, considering that about \$50,000 pays the hatchery's electrical bill.

Stocked fish account for the largest percentage of fish anglers catch in many North Dakota lakes. It is a good bet most of those fish – especially if they are walleye, trout or salmon – came from Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, tucked below Garrison Dam west of Riverdale, or the Valley City National Fish Hatchery, also a Fish and Wildlife Service facility.

In addition, it is a good bet that without Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration funds, the hatchery and North Dakota's fisheries would look vastly different today.



PATRICIA STOCKDILL

The process to raise fish to be stocked in North Dakota starts at the water's edge with eggs (above, left) from female fish. Sometimes the incubation process is started on site where the eggs were taken (above, right), but then they are transferred to the hatchery (above).

fishing-related equipment. That in turn translates to more license sales and more money from the Sport Fish Restoration program returned to North Dakota. In the end, anglers see more access and improved fishing opportunities.

Sport Fish Restoration funds also provided money for several fishery studies in the early to mid-1990s, Power said.

Life without Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration funding would be pricey when it comes to fishing. The Department is financially stable, but without Sport Fish Restoration funds, Power estimated fishing license prices would climb substantially to make up for lost excise tax revenue. A \$10 individual license would need to be at least \$35 for the Department to continue its fisheries programs at its current level.

Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Notes:

- Established by Congress in 1950.
- Modeled after the Pittman-Robertson Act (Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration) to create programs for management, conservation and restoration of fishery resources.
- Funded by an excise tax collected from manufacturers of fishing rods, reels, lures, flies, artificial baits and creels.
- Funds are collected by the U.S. Treasury and sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which distributes the money to all 50 states, Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, Northern Mariana Islands, and District of Columbia.
- Sixty percent of the share every state receives is based on the number of licensed anglers and 40 percent on its land and water area. No state can get more than 5 percent, or less than 1 percent, of each year's total apportionment.
- States must fund the full amount of an approved project and then apply for reimbursement of up to 75 percent of its expenditures. The state (North Dakota Game and Fish Department) must provide a minimum of 25 percent from a non-federal source.
- The 1984 Wallop-Breaux Amendment created an Aquatic Resources Trust fund, added import duties on equipment, boats and yachts, and instituted a motorboat fuel tax. The funding allowed for a minimum of 15 percent for access programs and established a maximum rate for boating and aquatic education at 10 percent.
- 1990 amendments included wetland conservation provisions.
- 1992 amendments created boat-related waste pump-out facilities programs.
- 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century raised the federal gas tax credited to the ART fund and provided mechanisms for more construction, maintenance and renovation of facilities.
- The Game and Fish Department received \$3.23 million in Sport Fish Restoration funds in 2006.

Sport Fish Restoration funds account for about 60 percent of the Department's total fisheries budget. The state receives more money back in Sport Fish Restoration funding than what its anglers pay in excise taxes, Power said. Save Our Lakes is the only Department fisheries program not dipping into this funding, he said.

What it's all About

An angler lands a rainbow trout in Turtle River State Park.

A fisheries biologist learns Lake Sakakawea's smelt population decreased because of declining water levels. In turn, that information helps document North Dakota's argument to conserve Missouri River water during drought years.

Devils Lake gets a new public boat ramp.

Red River lowhead dam modifications improve upstream fish movement and spawning.

Lake Sakakawea's lower east end, which seldom has good natural walleye reproduction, draws many anglers because stocking fills a niche that Mother Nature does not provide – walleye throughout the reservoir.

A child learns the nuances of casting.

Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery raises Sakakawea's chinook salmon, and rainbow trout stocked throughout the state.

Creel surveys provide insight into angler demographics and their successes.

Another child learns how to handle a boat safely.

This is what the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration is all about – providing fishing, access and safe boating opportunities in North Dakota and beyond. The foresight of anglers, industry officials and Congress more than five decades ago means people and fisheries resources reap the benefits today.

PATRICIA STOCKDILL, Garrison, is a freelance outdoor writer.